

The County Council Business Plan, including the budget for 2013/14

COUNCIL CONTINUES TO DO WHAT IS RIGHT FOR CAMBRIDGESHIRE

Council chiefs have proposed a business plan designed to protect the vulnerable while boosting jobs and prosperity, despite massive pressures from a fast-growing population and much-reduced funding.

The County Council's Cabinet will consider on January 29 a budget that is designed to continue doing what is best for the communities of Cambridgeshire and based on residents' feedback.

The Council must find savings of £32 million this year, which includes a like for like drop of £10.3 million Government funding, as well as meeting extra costs generated by increased population and inflation.

Cabinet will also debate whether to follow public opinion and raise Council Tax by a below inflation level of 1.99 per cent or accept the Government freeze. Freezing Council tax over the next two years could mean cutting vital front line services to meet the extra £37 million needed to fill the future funding gap it would create.

The proposed budget includes £1 billion of current and future funding to be spent on boosting education, transport links, broadband, business and care to make sure Cambridgeshire remains prosperous and a great place to live and work. At the same time the Council is proposing reducing management costs, sharing services with partners and looking at further innovative ways to deliver services and make taxpayers' money go further.

This includes groundbreaking ideas such as investigating proposals to act as a developer to bring forward the building of homes, making the most of some of the County Council's land holdings while securing much needed new and affordable homes. The Council is looking at proposals to build a new care home.

The business plan also sees the integration of public health into the authority as part of the Council's commitment to improving the health and quality of life for Cambridgeshire communities.

Residents will also be able to do much more online, saving money and making it easier to access Council services. Management and corporate costs are also being looked at as well as the use of reserves.

Employee costs continue to be kept below inflation and will be looked at. The Council continues to budget to freeze pay as it has in previous years.

Following a public consultation it is also proposed to raise Council Tax by 1.99 per cent to protect vital front line services and avoid a multi-million funding gap in the future.

The results of the You Choose survey showed that people understood that savings needed to be made. But it also showed four out of five people were prepared to pay at least 2 per cent more Council Tax to help retain services they value, such as adult social care, children's services and keeping Cambridgeshire moving. But Councillors have suggested keeping the rise well below inflation to help those struggling in these financially tough times.

Accepting the Council Tax Freeze offered by Government and freezing Council Tax over the next two years would reduce the Council's income by £10 million by 2017/18, leaving a £37.7 million hole to fill over the same period.

Cambridgeshire is the fastest growing county in the country according to the 2011 Census. This brings jobs and prosperity but it also means, unlike other areas of the UK, Cambridgeshire faces uniquely high and costly demands on all of its services. Despite these pressures, last year the Council, which has traditionally been one of the lowest taxing authorities of its kind in the country, saved £42.2 million.

Like other authorities, the Council is also facing the national problem of the growing cost of adult social care funding and has been leading the call for Government to grasp the nettle and address this issue properly.

But in the face of a like for like 6.4 per cent reduction in Government funding this financial year, combined with increased demand and inflation, the Council must find £146.5 million of savings over the next five years - a cumulative reduction of £466 million.

Despite having to find these massive savings the budget proposals, which will be considered by the Cabinet, includes around £500 million building and improvement programme for schools to make sure the County's children have the right start.

The Council will also maintain its investment in child protection whilst continuing the rollout of new ways of working to better safeguard children and young people in Cambridgeshire.

The Council will expand its highly successful reablement programme to help some of the most vulnerable in society keep their independence and dignity. This has been shown to prevent those being helped by the scheme from needing more critical and expensive care and further deterioration of their health. The Council is saving in other areas of Adult Social Care to invest in this initiative.

The Council is also looking into building its own specially built care home to reduce the expense for both those in care and the tax payer.

Despite the difficult financial position the Council will continue its commitment to significant capital funding for major transport projects such as the Ely Crossing and Cambridge Science Park rail station. The Council will also invest millions into helping bring better broadband to Cambridgeshire and is continuing to invest an additional £90 million into improving Cambridgeshire's roads over a five year period.

Cambridgeshire County Council Leader Nick Clarke, said: "This budget is based on the views of our residents and does what is best for Cambridgeshire. We are in the unique position of benefitting from tremendous growth to help create jobs and prosperity while having to fund the monumental pressures on our services that this brings. Encouraging growth brings better transport provision, business opportunities and jobs. But at the same time we have to fund the increased need for our care services so we can protect the most vulnerable.

"Despite these tremendous pressures and the £32 million in savings we need to make we have been able to continue in funding major projects that we announced last year. We are currently and plan to invest £1 billion in providing better school facilities as well as funding transport measures and helping people keep their dignity and health. Cambridgeshire will benefit from better broadband which will boost the economy and help our communities to access services.

We are slashing management costs in services and looking at reducing employment costs as well as being innovative in bringing forward plans to build a new care home and becoming a housing developer in our own right. But despite these savings the tremendous pressures put on the Council by growth and reduced Government funding means we must put up Council Tax or face a £37 million black-hole.

Freezing Council Tax would inevitably lead to vital services that we have protected needing instead to be cut. Residents have told us to make savings but have also supported putting up Council Tax to help the vulnerable and keep Cambridgeshire moving. We are proposing to keep any rise below inflation.

"These are very tough times for Councils but we will continue to do what is best for our communities."

County Councillor John Reynolds.

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